

The Teacher's Perspective on the Challenges of Implementing Quality Early Childhood Education in Their Classroom in The Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka.

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education plays an important impact in a child's future achievement and well-being at the age of three to five years. Therefore, preschool teachers have a crucial responsibility in establishing and maintaining the standards of quality early childhood education in their organizations. They have multiple roles, including being facilitators of learning, observers and assessors of children's development, and advocates for ensuring children's learning and well-being throughout the day. This research aims to explore the challenges encountered by preschool teachers in executing classroom activities in the Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka. The research will use a mixed-method approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data through a survey conducted with 22 preschool teachers. The research was conducted in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka, and the survey participants were selected from a random sample of teachers working in preschools located in Manmunai Southwest Education / D. S Division, Batticaloa district. In this research, several challenges have been identified in executing their classroom activities including inadequate technological aids, no standard curriculum, a lack of training programs and children-related challenges. Regarding these challenges, the study revealed that the government and administrators provided some support to preschool teachers. However, due to insufficient support for all preschool teachers, they continue to face challenges in executing their classroom activities. Thus, this research recommended that technological aids, be provided, designing a standard curriculum, and a National Preschool Teachers' Training program for all preschools. This will support teachers to ensure quality teaching and children can receive quality early childhood education in the Batticaloa District of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Preschool teachers, Preschool children, Challenges, Quality early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is vital to children's comprehensive growth and the continuous acquisition of knowledge throughout their lives. Furthermore, research evidence indicates that children who receive great preschool education outperform their peers. Educating children in preschool increases their chances of success in school, employment, and earnings in later life. As a result, there has been a decrease in crime activities as well as unhealthful behaviours. In this way, preschool teachers have a vital role in establishing and maintaining the standards of preschool education within their organisations. Phajane (2014) highlighted that preschool teachers have the overarching responsibility of ensuring children's learning and well-being development throughout the day. In addition to this, preschool teachers are accountable for further responsibilities, including teachers as facilitators of learning, teachers as observers and assessors of children's development and teachers as professional advocates. However, preschool teachers encounter challenges in executing their classroom activities (Warnasuriya et al., 2020). Thus, the main purpose of this research is to identify the challenges encountered by preschool teachers in executing classroom activities in the Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka. The research will propose recommendations to support preschool teachers in their practice.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM / REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The World Bank report (2019) noted that a lack of access to preschool education and the poor quality of learning was an ongoing challenge among preschools in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, insufficient support and poor funding

allocation from the government were also noted as a major problem in preschool education. For example, only 1.75% of the government budget was allocated to general education programs in Sri Lanka in 2013, leading to insufficient development of school facilities and unsuitable learning environments for students (The World Bank 2019). Particularly, the public expenditure on preschool education is low in Sri Lanka. Consequently, preschools are highly dependent on private financing (The World Bank 2019). Moreover, the poor funding by the government has increased the number of preschools owned by private entities. It is estimated that 71% of preschools in Sri Lanka are managed by private organisations or individuals (Warnasuriya et al. 2020). Therefore, The World Bank (2019) report suggests that the Sri Lankan government should increase its investment in education, especially preschool education, to align with other middle-income countries. Increased financial support could result in affordable and well-equipped preschool education for all children.

Furthermore, according to the National Census of Early Childhood Development Centers in Sri Lanka, in 2018, there were 19,668 preschools in Sri Lanka, with 71% managed by private organizations or individuals, 19.8% managed by public institutions and local government authorities such as municipal and urban councils, 6.8% managed by religious organisations, and 3% managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Another issue highlighted by The World Bank (2019) report is that inadequate training of preschool teachers in Sri Lanka affects the young learners' development in the future.

Regarding Early Childhood Educators, 59.9% of the 28, 449 preschool teachers have passed the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) Examination. Additionally, it has been noticed that 83% of teachers have completed a one-year or longer professional training program, while 9.5% of the current teachers do not possess any formal qualifications Warnasuriya (2020). Furthermore, Mukunthan (2020) articulated that preschool teachers require educational qualifications however, the educational qualifications and professionalism of teachers in most Sri Lankan preschools are a lower standard. This lack of qualified teachers is a major challenge to attaining the quality of early childhood education in the Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka.

Preschool teachers have a dual responsibility to establish a strong foundation in the classroom. They are expected to not only provide a solid foundation in the classroom but also to develop strong relationships with their children's parents and the community (Geiger and Pivovarova, 2018). However, when teachers start to feel mentally and physically drained, it not only impacts their own lives but also the lives of many young children in the classroom.

The World Bank (2014) report identified insufficient resources as one of the issues that affect classroom activities in Sri Lankan preschools and indicated that the challenges in preschool education in Sri Lanka are caused by negligible resource allocation from the government. In essence, classroom activities in preschool education in Sri Lanka require resources to enhance children's skills development (Nemeth and Simon 2013). Further, Usman (2016) stated that resources affect teaching and learning in preschool as well as classroom activities.

Another issue highlighted by The World Bank (2014) report is that inadequate training of preschool teachers in Sri Lanka affects the classroom activities offered to young learners. The poor training results in teachers having insufficient knowledge of various teaching approaches and a minimal understanding of how to design learning experiences for preschool children that support classroom activities. Less than half of the preschool teachers in Sri Lanka have achieved their advanced level of education, while only 39% have received at least one year of professional training (The World Bank 2014). In the analysis of the growing need for child education in Sri Lanka, Warnasuriya (2020) revealed that inadequately trained teachers are a major barrier to providing quality education to children between the ages of three and five years in Sri Lanka.

Aim Of the Research

This research aims to explore the challenges encountered by preschool teachers in executing classroom activities in the Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka. That is, the research identified factors hindering preschool teachers from supporting classroom activities among learners in preschools in Sri Lanka. By identifying these challenges, and exploring the related research literature, the study suggested recommendations to consider improving young children's classroom activities in Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka.

Research Questions

The overarching research question of the current study is:

What are the challenges encountered by preschool teachers to execute their classroom activities of preschool learners in the Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka?

To answer the main research question, sub-questions have also been developed. These are:

- i) What are the available supports from the government and administrators to execute classroom activities of young children in preschools?
- ii) How do preschool teachers currently approach their teaching practice to support preschool children's classroom activities?
 - a) What supports them in their work?
 - b) What are the difficulties they encounter?

METHODOLOGY

The Research Approach: Mixed Methods

In research, a mixed method is the systematic integration of qualitative and quantitative data within a single investigation (Regnault et al. 2018). Mixed methods are adaptable to many study designs in terms of methodological flexibility because the findings serve both qualitative and quantitative data outcomes. Mixed methods were considered appropriate in this research to provide an in-depth understanding of the problems faced by preschool teachers in their attempts at classroom activities of young learners.

Target Population

This research has selected 22 preschool teachers to gain insight into their perspectives, thoughts, and feelings about their classroom activities of the preschools. All participants were from the Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka.

Research Design

The research question focused on challenges encountered by preschool teachers in executing their classroom activities of preschool learners in the Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka. Exploring these factors in this research can only be achieved by utilising tools that capture qualitative and quantitative data. Surveys are the most popular data collection tools. Surveys can collect both qualitative and quantitative data based on the design of the study questions (Creswell, 2017). In this research, the data collection methods were survey. The survey has four sections. The first section covers the demographic profile of the respondents, section 02 includes preschool teachers' current approach to teaching practice, and the other section is related to the key factors that affect early childhood teachers' commitment and productivity. The final section covers the challenges encountered by preschool teachers in executing their classroom activities.

Sampling

The study setting for the research is the Eastern province of Sri Lanka and participants for the survey were drawn from a random sample of teachers located in Manmunai Southwest Education / D. S Division, Batticaloa district preschools. According to the Eastern Province Bureau, there are 44 preschool teachers in the Manmunai Southwest Education / D. S Division. For the research, a sample of 22 preschool teachers contributed and was selected based on a convenient sampling method representing the Batticaloa district.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Demographic Information

The demographic information concentrates on the preschool teachers' qualifications, years of teaching experience, and training programs they undertook.

It is noted that (32%; n=7) preschool teachers completed the General Certificates in Education Advanced Level (G.C.E A/L), (SLQF Level 2) Qualifications and (68%; n=15) preschool teachers completed the General Certificates in Education ordinary level (G.C.E O/L), (SLQF Level 1) qualification. Moreover, when we look at the National Vocational qualification, only five teachers had national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 4, (NVQF level 4) while 17 teachers completed NVQ level 3, (NVQF level 3).

Regarding the teachers' teaching experience, most of the teachers (73%; n=16) had five years of preschool teaching experience, while the remaining teachers were equally divided at 13.5% each between 3 years and 4 years of teaching experience. (See Figure: 1).

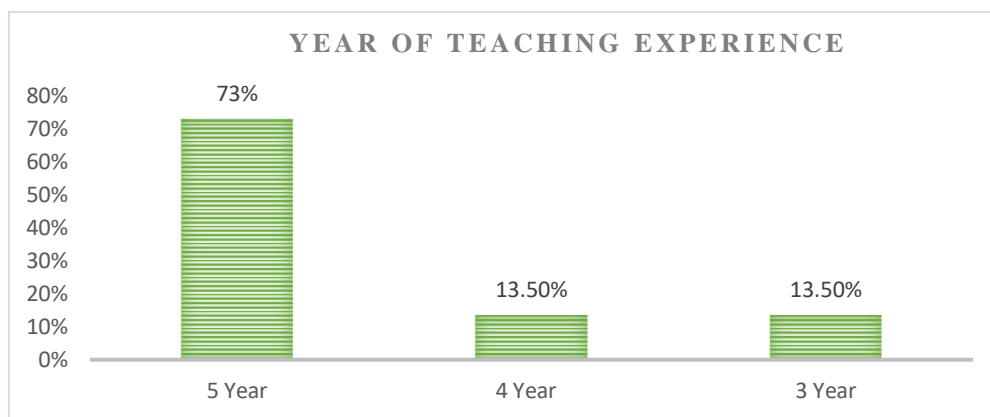


Figure 1: Preschool teachers' years of experience.

Available Support to Execute Their Classroom Activities

The preschool teachers also responded to questions related to the availability of support to execute their classroom activities. Support was categorised as that provided by administrators, the government, and parents. Figure 2 shows the percentage perceived by the teachers that were available to support them in classroom activities for each category.

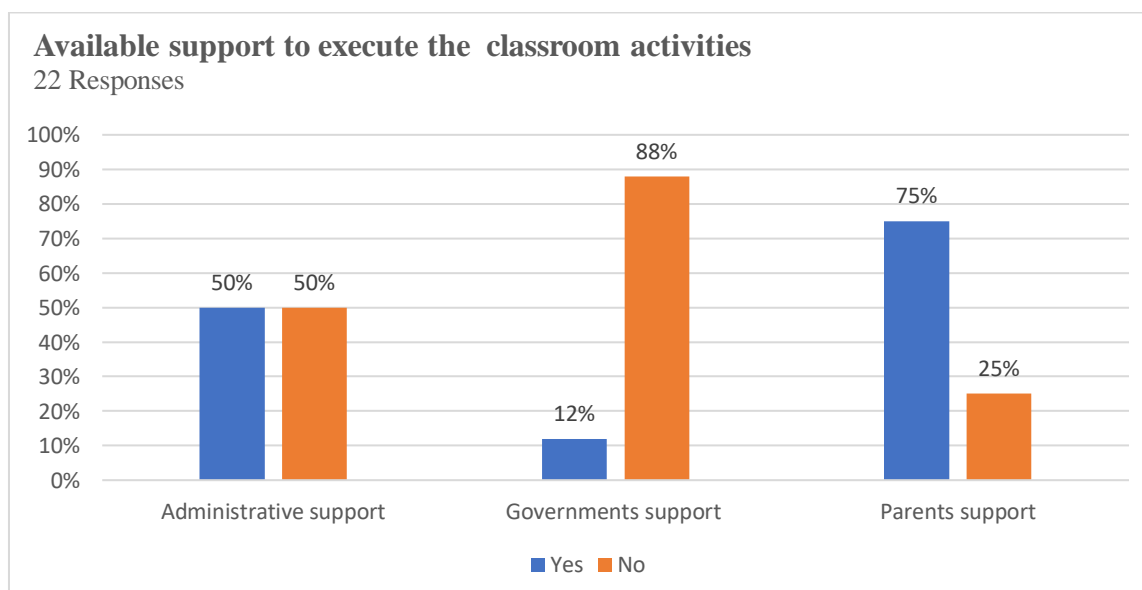


Figure 2: Administrators, Government, and Parents support to execute the classroom activities.

Figure 2 reveals that there was an equal number of teachers who agreed that they received administrators' support (50%) and those who felt that they received no support (50%) from administrators. Concerning Government support, the analysis shows that the majority of preschool teachers felt that they did not receive any Government support (88%), with only 12% of teachers indicating that they received government support to execute the classroom activities. Lastly, preschool teachers were asked about parental support concerning classroom activities. The response to this question, as shown in Figure 2, highlights that the majority of teachers (75%) specified that they received parental support regarding classroom activities. Only 25% of the teachers felt that they were not supported by their parents.

Preschool Curriculum and Challenges

Preschool teachers were also asked whether they thought the curriculum contained enough activities to enhance the abilities and skills of learners. Figure 3 shows the teachers' responses on this topic.

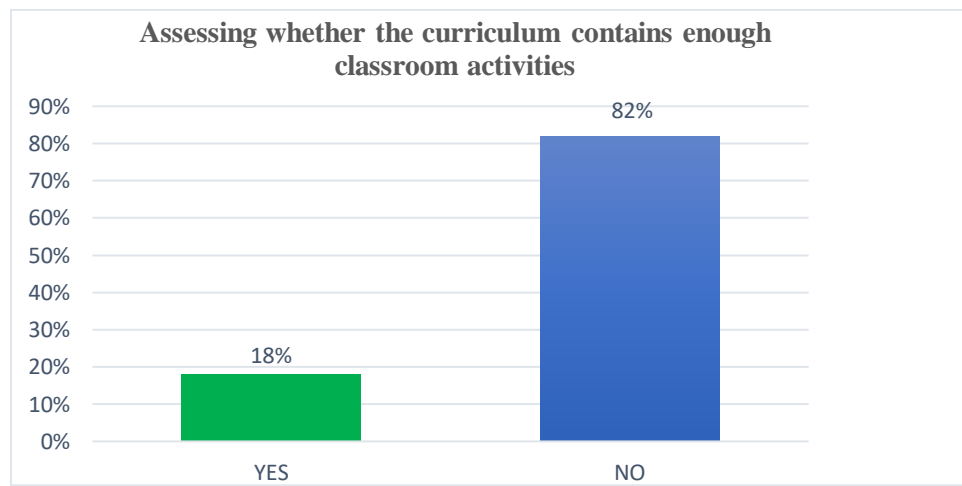


Figure 3: The curriculum has enough activities to improve learners' abilities and skills.

In Figure 3 it is noted that many teachers (82%) indicated that the preschool curriculum does not have enough activities to improve the abilities and skills of children, compared to (18%) of teachers who thought that it did. This Figure reflects that for a few of the preschool teachers surveyed, there is a need to increase the number of activities that are targeted at improving the young learner's abilities, and skills. When asked about whether they faced challenges in executing classroom activities of young learners, all respondents indicated that they experienced challenges. These challenges will be explained further in the qualitative data analysis section that follows.

Similarly, the preschool teachers were also asked to report on the availability of the training program for preschool teachers and the results are summarised in Figure 4.

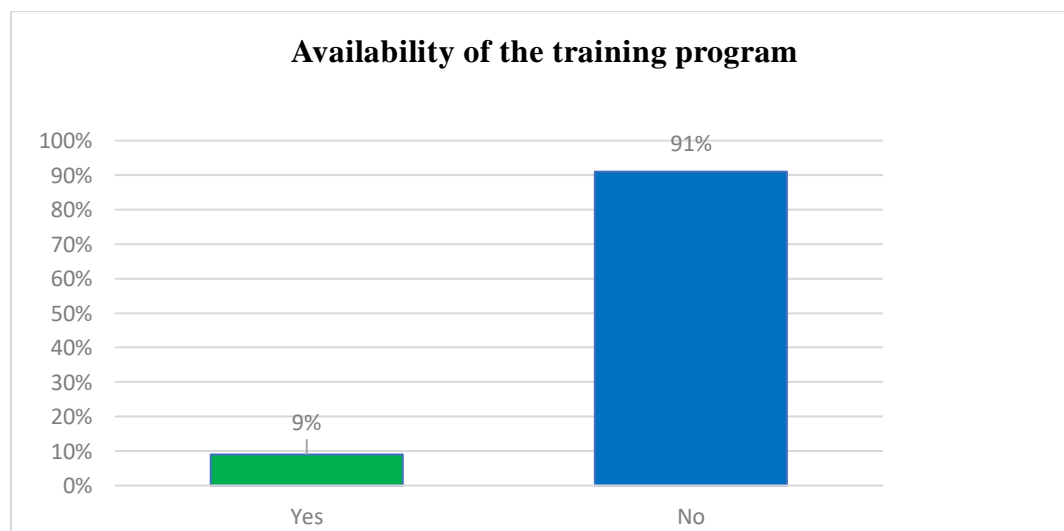


Figure 4: Availability of the training program.

Only 10% of preschool teachers highlighted that training programs are available in their workplace.

90% of preschool teachers indicated that a particular training program is to expand the capacity to handle the different challenges posed by children in classroom activities. However, their responses further explained that there was inadequate training for preschool teachers in the research area.

Throughout the qualitative data analysis, the survey responses are presented as preschool teachers' current approach to teaching practice, and challenges encountered by preschool teachers in executing the classroom activities. There are several sub-themes discussed to enable an in-depth insight into the different issues affecting preschool classroom activities.

Theme 1: Preschool Teachers' Current Approach to Teaching Practice

Pictures cards, play toys, songs and storytelling

Preschool teachers were asked to comment on their current teaching practice and how it is executed to support children's classroom activities. The analysis highlights that most preschool teachers identified the use of picture cards as an important resource when executing classroom activities. Some teachers explained that "telling stories using cards" was a valued classroom activity. They further suggested the use of play toys, picture cards and singing songs as being crucial for young children's classroom activities. For example, they explained, "We teach songs which are available in the textbook." These approaches highlight that the teachers view picture cards, toys and songs as important in helping them to execute their teaching practice effectively to execute their classroom activities. Some teachers indicated that combine songs with storytelling during classroom activities. Therefore, the analysis reveals that preschool teachers are using different materials and approaches to support children's classroom activities and their development.

Theme 2: Challenges Encountered by Preschool Teachers In Executing The Classroom Activities.

Challenge 1: Inadequate resources

When preschool teachers carried out their teaching practice, they faced several difficulties in their work.

Firstly, teachers pointed out that they do not have resources to support children's classroom activities and their development. Further, they highlighted that they do not utilise audio/video resources in their teaching activities. Analysis of the data demonstrates that inadequate resources are a key challenge for preschool teachers in their teaching practice. Apart from a lack of audio and video technological aids, the other challenges highlighted by preschool teachers relating to resources included insufficient materials and teaching tools. Specifically, they mentioned that there are no playing tools and resources. The analysis demonstrates that preschool teachers require adequate teaching tools, resources and materials to improve the classroom activities of young learners.

Challenge 2: Children-related Issues

Two children-related challenges were identified from the survey, including children's classroom behaviour and children's health issues.

Children's Classroom Behaviour

Other challenges noted by the preschool teachers' responses involved children's classroom behaviour. For instance, they indicated that "Children do not cooperate when doing classroom activities", and "Children are stubborn, crying, angry, reserved, and not being silent". Further, they indicated that "Due to the shyness children do not actively participate in singing songs". These comments confirm that children's lack of participation in classroom learning activities due to their behaviour is a challenge for preschool teachers.

In addition, a few more teachers indicated that "Children are misbehaving while doing classroom activities...and children are willing to get activity cards mischievously before others while doing skills activities". This

statement demonstrates that children's classroom behaviours are a challenge for preschool teachers when they are trying to execute the classroom activities of young learners.

Children's health issues

In developing children's classroom ability, the preschool teachers had to confront other challenges such as children's health issues. As they noted, *"I am facing a lot of challenges to carry out teaching and learning activities for children with hearing impairment, short-sightedness and speech difficulties"*. The analysis illustrates that children's health issues are also a challenge for preschool teachers in executing classroom activities.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Recommendation

The following recommendations are suggested as ways this could be achieved.

The Government should provide audio and video materials for all preschools in the rural and urban areas. Moreover, preschool administrators should ensure that preschool teachers have enough technological aids and teaching materials for classroom activities.

Additionally, the partnership between the rural and urban preschool management committee and the Ministry of Education should set up a monitoring system of the rural preschools to identify their needs and to ensure resources distributed by the Government are sufficient. Thus, the Government and administrators should take necessary action to distribute the resources since preschool teachers experienced a lack of resources, especially in the technological aids (audio/video) and disparity of the resource allocation issues as a major challenge regarding improving young learners' classroom activities.

This research has identified a need for the Government to design and implement a universal Sri Lankan preschool curriculum to be followed in all Sri Lankan preschools, both public and privately owned. This is important as there is currently no standard curriculum in Sri Lanka and preschool teachers utilise different types of curriculum documents and activities to conduct preschool. A standard curriculum would ensure consistency in what is taught and provide guidelines that can assist preschool teachers in helping learners with classroom activities. A national preschool curriculum would establish the foundation for what preschoolers are expected to learn and what teachers need to teach.

The Government initiative to introduce a National Preschool Teachers' Training Program would ensure that there is a uniform training program for all preschool teachers before they begin their teaching careers. The training would help to improve the preschool teachers' abilities, knowledge, and confidence since they will feel more confident about their teaching practice as they will all have the required national training qualifications as a starting point. For preschoolers, this will boost their classroom activities as teachers will be better trained.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that several challenges have been identified to sustain classroom activities. Thus, the research has suggested important recommendations for implementation in Sri Lanka's preschool education system. These recommendations would help support quality early childhood programs moving forward by addressing these challenges.

The successful adoption of these recommendations by the Government including policymakers, and preschool administrators, could result in the raising of teaching practice standards, and improved preschool learners' classroom activities in the Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka.

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